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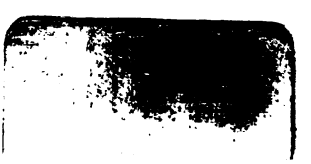

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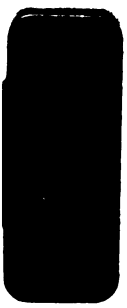

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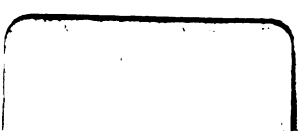

THE CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD

A New Year's Sermon

PREACHED BY

REVEREND CHARLES F. RUSSELL

AT WESTON, MASS., ON SUNDAY, JANUARY THE SECOND, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SIXTEEN

Printed at the request of the First Parish in Weston

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PRESS OF GEO. H. ELLIS CO.
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THE CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD

They shall possess it forever, from generation to generation shall they dwell therein.—ISAIAH xxxiv. 17.

I have taken my text from one of Isaiah's descriptions of redeemed Israel; that is, from one of his visions of the Church of the living God of his day. He saw it embodied in the men and women whom he knew, presented in the striving, suffering, achieving folk whose companionship he shared. Not elsewhere than through human experience did he conceive it could be established on the earth. And yet he did not think of the constituents of the Church as isolated individuals, giving to it a detached and singular devotion, finding it a means for their private opinions and aims and desires, moving unallied in its service. Rather did he conceive of the Church as embodied in groups of individuals, moved by a common purpose, sinking their private desires in pursuit of the general good, and reinforcing and advancing it by the consecration of successive generations which together as-

sumed its responsibilities, and together relinquished its care. But, though dwelling in these united individuals, and having no other possible expression than their transient personalities, Isaiah believed that the Church had an independent and eternal existence, and therefore possessed its members, its representatives, and was not possessed by them. Israel was continually redeemed from generation to generation, and by what moved onward with power and direction other than its own. The individuals in their several generations were taken up by this eternal and progressive movement, served therein their time, and then intrusted to their successors the requirements which abode forever. Such, I think, was Isaiah's conception of Israel's redemption, and of how his contemporaries, as persons, and as a generation, gave themselves for its expression and advance.

So true is this vision that I might use it to clear much that is confused in the development of Christianity. I have, however, a much narrower aim. I wish to apply it to the history of this Church and Parish.

Once God's living Church had no visible existence in this region. We are not to be-

lieve that God's will was not done, his truth not assured, his love not operative here. For they are ever and everywhere effective. But no company of individuals had gathered that they might publish that truth, and witness of that love, and further that will. Then, impelled by their own present needs, their appreciation of their debts to the past, and their consciousness of responsibilities to the generations which were to come, the inhabitants of this region joined; that they might become a tangible, recognizable home for God's living, progressive, and eternal Church; that they might give it somewhat in which to dwell.

What that meant for the good of this section I do not think the wisest, the most imaginative of us can begin to tell. Nor can we adequately estimate the courage, the consecration of the founders of this Parish. They could hardly maintain themselves without the added charge of the Church. It took them five years to build their first meeting-house, thirty by thirty feet. It took them fourteen years to become so one in temper and desire and movement as to settle a minister who understood them and would aid them in that

surrender of their private preferences which alone made them capable of efficient service in the Church of the living God. But, though we see this early period as one of trial and agitation and even strife, they felt it to be a time of joy, of success, as the records all show. For more and more they passed out of their individual isolations, evolved a common vigorous hopeful life together, and felt that they were a real and successful instrument for the expression of the living God.

But as I look back upon the early history of this Church it is most difficult to visualize persons. Then, as now, they must have existed as the necessary basis of the Church's being. But it is in groups devoted to effecting certain definite, necessary projects that the sustainers of this Church can best be made real. There was the generation who, after the settlement of William Williams in 1709, sank all their previous differences in aggressive, common efforts, and increased the membership of this Church from thirty to four hundred and twenty-five members, and gave it a relative importance in the Commonwealth that it has never surpassed. Then we have the generation that had to do with the Revolution,

and which kept this community sanely, vigorously in line with the most progressive efforts for independence on Great Britain, and did its full share in the creating of these United States. Then follows the generation which received the theological questions which grew out of the discussions of religious freedom incident to the Revolution, and which carried this Church, without any discernible friction or a dissenting vote, out of Orthodoxy into full fellowship with Unitarianism. Another generation dealt with the Civil War, and held this Parish in harmony with all its best ideals. In our Parish records may be found the names of individuals who were leaders or servants of their fellows in the achieving of the ends sought by these different groups. But what has impressed me is not the evidence of leadership, but its absence. Without the influence of any powerful individuals, each generation in this Church has assumed the tasks which have come to it, and out of its common wisdom and generosity and sacrifice has held this Parish in accord with its best traditions, and with those of the Commonwealth, and moved it in harmonious co-operation with the most advanced procedures of God's living

Church. Individuals of insight and courage and passion always must have existed here; but they have been individuals so devoted to the common aims of their generation, so satisfied in their service to that to which the Church has been committed, that our records do not emphasize their names, and while witnessing imperfectly as to what has been done, tell yet less as to who did it.

But this is just what we should expect to discover in the history of any right Church if the conception of God's redeeming procedure which I have presented to you as that of Isaiah be true. What the individuals of all ages really desire is to escape from themselves. They wish to join with their fellows in the pursuit of ends which will augment the social life of all, and therefore must needs forego their peculiar aims, that they may endeavor for what all incline towards. And to these several groups come varied requirements incident to the development of mankind. For now the attaining of the bare means of existence seems paramount, as when the Pilgrims first came to Plymouth. And again political freedom, or the abolition of slavery, is presented as the hour's demand

upon a whole generation. But these fluctuating tasks which the generations attempt are, after all, but a moment in that eternal advance of God's holy spirit in which all generations, as all individuals, find their real joy, their full life. That this Church has continued to be, that it has never lacked persons and generations to make it equal to the demands of any time, is proof not only of its own efficiency and worth, but also of the richness of life of its adherents and supporters.

If I turn from the past and consider the generation of which I have been a part, and which has now rounded to its full complement of years, it seems to have had two quite different characteristics. Or, it may be, my life with you has covered parts of two generations feeling varied requirements. Or probably I am so much a part of my own time as to be unable to discover what has been its essential mission. But when I came to Weston Science held the foremost place in the thoughts of men. By Science was not meant that endeavor to bring the forces and substances of the earth into greater usefulness, which has produced the telephone, and the automobile, and the flying-machine, but that

search for a rational scheme of the universe which would accord with the facts of existence. Geology was interesting to the men of my youth, not chiefly because it helped to locate oil and coal and copper and iron, but because it showed that the conception of creation which had been deduced from the first chapter of Genesis could not be true, could not be fitted in with what swayed men's every-day conduct. Science was a new perception of truth, and required a devotion, an allegiance, that was ready for any sacrifice. The men who were its leaders—Darwin and Huxley and Tyndall—were idealists, and had wholly different aims and methods from those which now govern such men as Edison and Tesla and Burbank. My predecessor, Mr. Sears, dealt with Science as truth when he wrote his "Heart of Christ," and was wholly in accord with its endeavor when he wrought here his spiritual and scholarly and devout ministry. Much later came that effort to reform business and government and society, which legislated for insurance companies, and railroads, and cities, and the housing of the poor, and the public health; and which was wholly interrupted (if not terminated) by the

present war. Both the tasks in which I see my generation engaged have thus been completed. At least the interest and effort which they once commanded would seem to have been permanently diverted.

But I do not press the worth of these characterizations of my own generation upon you. I do not feel sure of their accuracy myself. I am too intimate with the individuals who constituted it. I have been, and am, too closely surrounded by the members of this Church to attain that detachment which enables me rightly to estimate them as a generation. And what an admirable and dear company they appear! Not only welded together in common aims and efforts, not only devoted to the Church of the living God, but personally of the best strain the world has ever known, and evidencing the virtues of the age and place. And as I look back I can see another Church and another congregation, and recall to my sight and heart the grandparents of the children of this time, finding in our services and fellowship rewards and consolations for all their daily efforts, and happy in being used for the eternal business of the Church of God. What a noble company of women

I recall! Out of the past they emerge, as ever bringing blessings. One I found here, born a saint, whom the trials of existence, which defeat or dull or imbitter so many of us, did but provoke to fuller sainthood; whose grace was sufficient to cover the faults and defects of all her friends, and whose sweetness of spirit, and wholesomeness of faith, and efforts to increase the comfort and joy of her contemporaries were unfailing; and whose memory creates an altar to goodness in the hearts of all that knew her. For the welfare of this Church she was happy to give whatever she had, and her kindness ever outran its needs. There was another, gifted with social power and charm, with zeal and intelligence that seemed inexhaustible, trained in the best traditions of our Commonwealth, disciplined by a wide knowledge of the world, tempered by a piety which entered into all the fibres of her gifts; and who found in the interests of this rural community, and the rites and requirements of this Church, her fullest life, her freest human intercourse, her closest communion with God,—here found a sanctuary for her loyalty, her activity, and her ambition. I cannot forget a third, whose

vivacity and ardor brightened every meeting in which she was a participant, whose eagerness spurred us all to emulation, whose efficient helpfulness was informed by an undue humility, whose tenderness and patience and care for the sick and the needy never failed, and whose quick departure into heaven suddenly deprived us of a light which nothing has altogether replaced.

But there were others who came to Weston after I did, who brought rich gifts for our help. One I recall, of fine, broad scholarship, with tested powers for enlightenment and inspiration, of perfected character, whose great work had been done elsewhere, but whose potent influence for all excellence, and wise counsels, and appreciations both corrective and consoling, refreshed life for some of us. And another whose brief sojourn with us never made her more than a visitor, with so virile a soul that it soon wore out her frail body, but whose interest in our proceedings brought us memorials which will probably last as long as this edifice. She left impressions that, in my soul, at least, were most important, and blessings that have gladdened my years. But I cannot begin to distinguish

the women of this Church now gone from us, many, if less notably equipped, rendering as full service, who found here the keenest satisfaction, and in whom God's holy spirit found means to proceed, and to bless his children.

And the men! the best product of New England, possessing unconsciously that rectitude and integrity, that reverence for truth and righteousness, that ingrained patriotism and religion, which most happily characterize this section; the older revealing to their intimates, beneath their more apparent virtues, a dry sweetness, rectified affections, which made them, not only helpful, but cleansing assistants in any worthy work; and the younger displaying such disciplined strength, such readiness to serve, such enthusiasm for every good cause, as to make all yokes easy, and every burden light. I cannot more fully specify even the most notable among them. Nor is there so much occasion. For time has left active among us more of the men than of the women who have been prominent in the affairs of this Church throughout my generation. What a joy to live among such persons, to be permitted their confidence and to share their endeavors, to profit by their peculiar

gifts and their notable experiences, to join with them in the sanctities of their sorrows, and of their successes!

And yet they who are gone and you who are here have ever revealed yourselves to me as more than persons. For as members of this Parish, as attendants on these services, I have seen you continually yield your individual preferences that the common aim be advanced, and find yourselves, as Jesus promised, as you gave yourselves away. You have been more to me than individuals. You have been joined in somewhat to which you were glad to give yourselves. You have been a Church, and thereby an instrument for the progressions of the living God. You have been a generation equal to its burdens, and efficient for the cares laid upon it.

I suppose the construction of this building the most notable material event in my ministry here. It was not erected by individuals. Many did not wish for a new church; others, not for one like this. There is hardly a detail in this building that does not represent the thwarting of the wishes of some one. But action seemed imperative. A common intention was at length arrived at. As a Church

you found a way to house yourselves for your common worship.

And I wish to convince you, from this survey of the past, that as you front this new year you may do so in confidence and assured hope. For human nature does not change except to become more susceptible to the incitements of the spirit. To-day, as always, men wish to escape from loneliness and isolation, and join with their fellows for the pursuit and service of truth and right and love. In the old way, as a unit, you will go forward to further and increased usefulness and success. You will merge your particular knowledge and aims and even your particular revelations in those of your fellows, and, striving for the expression of that common disposition, will become more and more efficient for the work and the victory which are the continuous products of God's living Church.

It has seemed well for me to make this application of Isaiah's vision of Israel redeemed to this Church, not only because we stand at the beginning of a new year, but what I think more important, at the beginning of a new generation. This war has made an end of

many things. It will change not only nations, but ideals. Through it God will make some new demand upon the world, and upon you; for the good of his children, for the clearing of his truth, for the health of men's souls, for the enlargement of his mercy. Individually you will feel that demand. But as a Church you must meet it. And the ties that make you one will seem more admirable and more dear as you discover that without them you cannot do what you would and must. For this new essay, for this fuller and nobler manifestation of yourselves and of the community, you need fresh knowledge, keen sympathy with the spirit of the new time, the language of the hour, the eagerness and the methods which belong to youth. And these I can no longer give. I belong to a generation that has come to an end, and with other leadership and service you must meet the new age. Therefore, that this Church of the living God may keep its progressive way, and that you, its members, out of your gifts and means may be able to provide the sacrifices which will adequately satisfy the new time, I feel I must resign as your minister. The ties which bind me to you as individuals

only death can terminate. But my connection with you as the head of your Church I can no longer rightly maintain. I ask you to dissolve it on the first of next April when I shall have been with you almost exactly a third of a century. It can be good for neither you nor me now to reckon the sharpness of the pain that will attend this separation for some of us. But it is in the nature of the relation that it must end. And I am convinced that reflection will persuade you all that this is the fitting time to bring it to a close.

"New occasions teach new duties; Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of Truth."

And into your new adventures in this new year and generation, for justice, for life, and for God, in which I have not the strength to accompany you, I bid you now and always, God-speed.

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